

SHORT STORY

The Joy of Feminist Agony

IQBAL AZIZ
(freely translated by Mohammed Shahidul Islam)

"What is our unhappiness? Sakhina, can you tell me? Do you know how powerful we are in this country? The prime minister is a woman; the opposition leader is a woman...in the police, in the army - where are there not women? Moushumi is a woman, Shabnur is a woman, everywhere there are women, and only women. Let's do one thing on this solitary mid-day. Let's shout out a slogan: In every corner what is heard...are echoes of women's victory..."

The above lines are being spoken by a woman, by Jarina, and directed to the lovely, amorous Sakhina. Jarina is dark and mannish-looking. Tall and healthy, she works as the manager of a biscuit and bread factory. Jarina and Sakhina are two close friends, and live together.

Sakhina works as a receptionist in Shuranjana ad firm at Mohakhali. Male hearts beat faster on seeing her dazzling eyes and sexy figure. Sakhina and Jarina have been living in the same room of Adarsha Karmajibi Nari Hostel at Tejgaon for about two- and-a-half years. About a hundred women of different ages, from 20 to 50 years old, live in this middle-sized women's hostel. Most of them are from different villages, having come to the capital city to survive, wounded by poverty or having been exploited and ill-treated by society in their respective lives.

At the end of a straight lane on the left-hand side of Tejgaon Rail Station stands Adarsha Karmajibi Nari Hostel. Gossip and rumours float through the surrounding male population of the locality, and beyond, regarding this pale yellow-coloured hostel. At the hostel's entrance, three guards stand on duty in shifts. There is no trace of any males within the hostel, apart from these three guards, a middle-aged manager and the landlord. The manager monitors on a daily basis the entry and exit of each occupant of



artwork by amina

this women's hostel.

The rooms are narrow, with two or three women boarders in each room. It is now 10 o'clock at night. In the corner room of the second floor, Sakhina and Jarina are conversing in their normal way. Good-looking, voluptuous Sakhina says to Jarina, "That scoundrel MD Thandu Raihan of my office is bothering me a lot. He often proposes to me to go out with him: 'Sakhina, let's go for Chinese tonight!' I keep teasing the scoundrel on. I am definitely aiming to entice him to come beside the Tejgaon Station once."

Jarina smiles, "We will grab his all money and property. Then you would be the MD of the company, and I'd be the manager." Jarina lights a cigarette and puffs.

Shahajada Biscuit and Bread Factory, where Jarina works as manager, is close to Tejgaon Rail Station. Her office, from where she supervises everything, is next to the rail station. It is from this office that Sakhina goes to hunt one or two big rich customers every

week. She is used as a bait to lure in local and foreign rich guys. She also targets men looking for sex from Kamalapur, Motijheel, Dhanmondi, Gulshan and other commercial areas of the city.

There are some professional muggers in Jarina's control. Once Sakhina has the rich man inside Jarina's office room, an elaborate trap is then sprung on the prey by Jarina and her group, using threats, blackmail and hijacking. Jarina's group is equipped with a bogus photo journalist and fake detective personnel. She uses them to threaten the so-called gentleman with exposure and consequent social cost. The rich foreigner or local victim who comes in excitedly usually has to run from the place minus his wallet, mobile, watch, briefcase, passport and all other valuable items. Their faces are distorted. Only the clothes they are wearing are left untouched and safe. They are relieved to find that they will not be socially humiliated. Aside from their regular jobs, Jarina and Sakhina's

earnings from this business are not inconsiderable. Two or three male members of their group get a cut of the earnings but the directions and tactics are given solely by Jarina and Sakhina.

At night in the corner room of the second floor of women's hostel, out of an abundance of joy, Jarina whistles long and loudly. The women here are all independent, enjoy freedom in this hostel, and no one disturbs each other. Sakhina brings out a bottle of Carew's gin from a box and sets down two glasses. She pours out the gin and mixes water and 7-Up with it. These two friends start to drink, toasting to each other's happiness. Every night, they push together their twin beds to make one. While drinking Sakhina enjoys looking at her face in the big mirror of the dressing table as tight-bodied, tall Jarina tightens her hands around sexy Sakhina. Then they press their lips against each other and ecstatically kiss each other. Looking at their reflections in the mirror, they burst into laughter. In this world, at nights, they do not feel the lack of male company. They complement each other wonderfully.

Jarina starts singing while looking at the mirror:

*I do not know good or bad...
I do not know; I do not know...
Only I know you, I know you;
Oh my fairy...*

While the singing goes, behind them at Tejgaon Rail station a train passes in the direction of Gazipur. Where will the train go? How far?

Tejgaon Rail Station seems desolate amid a cruel brick-and-cemented Dhaka city. Passenger trains do not halt at the station, only cargo trains. It is as if the station exists for trade and commerce. There are huge trees and old buildings around the station. In this very place, Shahajada Biscuit and Bread Factory is situated beside a banyan tree. Manager Jarina's office is right next to this

factory. The proprietor of the factory is Jarina's close relative, who has been living in the Middle East for a long time. Suranjana ad firm, where Sakhina works, is at Mohakhali. The MD of the firm Thandu Raihan calls Sakhina over to his residence at noon. Where, once again, he recites the same old verse, "Sakhina! Let's go to the Fantasy Kingdom at Ashulia."

Sakhina replies, "Sir, my elder sister would like to meet you for an important matter. Would you please come with me tomorrow to my sister's office at Tejgaon?"

Politics, society, culture - in Bangladesh everything is sunk into corruption. And in the midst of all this, these two women are surviving in Tejgaon Adarsha Karmajibi Nari Hostel in Dhaka city. Now it is 3 o'clock at night. Jarina switches on the light and says "Ai, Sakhina! Won't you get married?" Both of them are completely naked, like humankind in a more primitive age. One is attractive, bright and sexy, while the other one is dark of skin, tall, tight-bodied, and mannish in body structure. On this soothing autumn rainy late night, they have dispensed with all covetous and wicked males of the world.

Sakhina responds to Jarina's words, "Impossible! I will not marry any man at all. I spit on their faces."

The wonderful night is witness to the agony of these two feminists. A gentle breeze passes by the station.

Jarina and Sakhina embrace each other and start to weep. They start singing of freedom:

I have built my nest with you in the pleasure of your company...

Sakhina and Jarina keep laughing. A late-night train runs away from the station towards the direction of Kamalapur.

Naribadi Jontronar Ananda, was originally published in Kaaler Kheya of the daily Shomokal, 19 January 2007. Mohammad Shahidul Islam works at the Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation.

The Bond Brand Lives On

SHIHAB A AZHAR

James Bond has proved to be a lasting brand name, and a moneyspinner for the Fleming Estate. Aside from other spin-offs, the estate contracted Charlie Higson to write about the 'young Bond' at Eton College, and then chose Sebastian Faulks, author of a fine 1993 best-selling war novel titled *Birdsong*, to produce the latest adventure of the most famous employee of Her Majesty's Secret Service. The result, *Devil May Care*, was launched with great fanfare by Penguin UK. It has now been released by Penguin India, aimed at the thriller-consuming Indian reading class.

The first thing a reader of the book will realize is that Faulks is no Ian Fleming. But then the same is true of the latest Bond movies, where Daniel Craig's Bond is hardly the same Bond portrayed over a generation ago by the likes of Roger Moore and Sean Connery. Craig's Bond has metamorphosed into a darker character, with less frills and more anger, especially as portrayed in the latest installment, 'Quantum of Solace'. Faulks' Bond is similarly dark, having seemed to have shed almost all his flippancy in favor of a more aggressive and ruthless special agent.

In creating a dark Bond, Faulks foregoes much of the wit and humour that characterized Ian Fleming's books. All that remains are some overly sarcastic exchanges with M which seem, at best, misplaced and exaggerated. A



careful reader will definitely be struck by the sheer implausibility of the plot, which winds its way through, of all places, Iran, which seems like a hedonist heaven, complete with drug smuggling from Afghanistan, bath houses, and seductive women. It's an Iran that's almost impossible

to imagine in today's world; as laden with the vestiges of the 1960s, however, it's strangely believable. Along the way, Bond bumps into familiar faces - Felix Leiter and Rene Mathis, among others - and meets some new friends, like the head of operations in Tehran, the instantly likable Darius Alizadeh.

Of course, no Bond story is complete without the nefarious villain, and this book features a villain who is diabolical, has a deformity and a resultant inferiority complex, but, most importantly, an ominous henchman. Bond first meets his nemesis while playing a game of tennis, a decidedly un-Bond-like game, which he wins despite the villain's attempts to cheat. From there, he finds out about the villain's undying hate for

England, and his desire to not only drown England in narcotics and drugs, but to also incite a nuclear war between England and the Soviet Union. However, throughout the book, the villain's evil is overshadowed by the ferocity of his sidekick, to the point where one begins to completely forget about the villain.

Devil May Care features the latest in a line of beautiful Bond girls. This book's female protagonist, Scarlett Papava, is almost as dark as Bond, and hides a secret that most readers will guess quite early in to the book. To be honest, her involvement frequently defies explanation, and her reasons and motivation seem quite stretched and strange.

As has been said before, the sheer implausibility of the plot is one of this book's most prominent features. However, it is a James Bond novel, and therefore, by definition, is not supposed to be completely realistic. This is a great book for those times when one needs to mainline pure adrenaline into one's bloodstream, and is a fun quick read. To truly enjoy it, one must suspend one's sense of reality, and let the book take one into Bond's world of intrigue, mystery and drama.

Devil May Care was written on the occasion of Ian Fleming's 100th birth anniversary. Had he been alive, Fleming would no doubt have enjoyed the book immensely.

Shihab A Azhar works at the International Finance Corporation and wishes he had more time to read books



Words Don't Bite, Or Do They?

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

My colleague, Jeff, never gets upset when his friends swear at him. He also expects others to reciprocate in kind, and feels that the world would be a better place if everyone, particularly his coworkers, react to verbal assaults with equanimity. "Words don't bite," he says. If he swears, you will hardly notice any emotion either in his face or voice to suggest that he is insulting or trying to hurt the interlocutor!

Of course, his views are not necessarily shared by others. One could debate whether the world would be a more peaceful place if we all played by the rules, but that is not to be. In the world of politics, for example, where anyone who watches public debates on political or economic issues knows how choice of words can make or break a person or a policy. In the recent US Presidential elections, John McCain made the fatal mistake of using the two words, "fundamentally sound," to describe the state of the US economy in September. Oops! Wrong words at the wrong time. Some have speculated that his real intention was to give hope to a nervous populace, and not to give the Bush Administration a clean bill of health, which is how it was perceived. His detractors have attributed it to McCain's lack of understanding of the fundamental principles of economics. Be that what it may, once he uttered the words, nothing he subsequently said or did could undo the damage that was done. Reminded me of Omar Khayyam:

The moving finger writes; and, having writ,
Moves on: nor all thy piety nor wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a line,
Nor all thy tears wash out a word of it.

Obama, on the other hand, uses words wisely and eloquently. It is generally acknowledged that his road to victory was in no small measure paved by his ability to

articulate issues with well-crafted sentences, and his well-honed mastery of the delivery mechanism. Any student of US politics would do well to look at his "Race Speech" delivered in the heat of the Democratic primary campaign. At a crucial moment when some words and condemnations uttered by Rev. Jeremiah Wright, Obama's pastor, threatened to exacerbate the inter-racial tension and derail Obama's grasp of the nomination, he stood back and addressed the American people. The speech, also known as the "A More Perfect Union" speech, laid out his view of the racial issues, not the most exciting subject. However, what made the difference were Obama's artistry and his ability to convey his message in magical terms.

Words and their interplay are fascinating in the legal arena too. An interesting aspect of the Inauguration was the faux pas committed by Chief Justice Roberts while swearing in Barack Obama. Justice Roberts misplaced a couple of words, which herald in the new chief executive. According to the US Constitution, the oath that a President takes reads as follows:

"I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will faithfully execute the office of President of the United States, and will to the best of my ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States."

However, Justice Roberts moved the word "faithfully" from before "execute" to after "United States". In addition, the words "office of President" came out as "office to President". The millions of people gathered at the Washington Mall, or were watching on TV, did not catch this sleight of words, and those who did were inclined to overlook such minor discrepancies. However, the impact of Justice Roberts' rearrangement of a few words turned out to be quite different in this age of instant messaging and global networking. Pretty soon rumors started to circulate that because of Justice Roberts' arbitrary juxtaposition of

words, President Obama and his assumption of office could be challenged in court on a technicality. As we all know, America is a nation of lawyers, and some crack lawyer, or a crackpot, might decide to have some fun by challenging the President by filing a motion with a lower level judge in an obscure court willing to issue an injunction.

Fortunately for us, Justice Roberts soon contacted the White House and offered to administer the oath a second time at the President's convenience in the latter's office, which was done on January 21st.

Let me end this letter with an anecdote. In an article for this newspaper, I used the word *abhiman* to describe a sentiment with a very Bengali meaning. I had trouble finding an English word (or for that matter in any other language) that one would associate with *abhiman*. I used the word "pique" and placed it alongside *abhiman* for the benefit of non-Bengali readers. Little did I anticipate the flurry of emails and comments from readers who basically took umbrage at my "glib" attempt at trying to pass off lowly pique to capture the exalted feeling of *abhiman*. A friend of mine wrote,

"I asked my son who is an English major from BU and is intensely involved in English literature, about any English word for *obhimaan*. He told me, 'Abbu, how do you think there can ever be an English word for *obhimaan*?'"

After reading these "fan" mail, I was feeling a little grumpy and started commiserating with Rumi, my wife. After listening to me patiently for a few minutes, her only reaction was, "Moina, you are taking things too personally!"

Ouch, that hurt! I wish Jeff were around to enjoy this conversation.

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The Yellow Bird's Whistle

MARUFUL ISLAM
(translated by Farid Rahman)

Do you yourself know what you desire?

Sitting in the coffee shop on an evening
On the table in front of you
A mug of ice-cubed cold coffee
Soft music, indistinct talk, bits of broken laughter
And other ambient noises

Do you feel a thirst?

You turn around to see
Who comes for you leaping across mountain paths and valleys
Who raises the dust of horse hooves on the broken horizon
Who makes unreal rainfall in scorching *Chaitra* with a magic finger
Who lays out a perfect full-moon night on a heaving sky
Who irresistibly knocks on your many doors

You didn't draw him close in your prayers
You didn't fulfill him on flower and concrete

Even though forever I hear inside me
The yellow bird's whistle.



Thinking of You
(To WH)
SHABNAM NADIYA

The good fire is quenched, the good spirit withdrawn,
when arrives what I fear:
a gathering of crows in this nascent light
as a glimmer in the shadows heralds my rise.

So what if my veins run with blood my own
instead of yours? Who dare proclaims me a breed
apart or ordains me priestess in this burning unfaith?

Stories were worth it, you said, for drawing upon
the mythic unbound could magic the spirit dark.
I call to you now, oh best beloved and now most unbelieved
Who are you now, today? The vast raiment of your mind itches
on the flesh of their puny desires.

Now we see you, now we don't:
Consummate conjurer you, stick to your joyous song
while we search and search our earthbound sorrows.

And here I remain: I claim you for my own,
Oh, old man with restless feet, as you wander off to paths
yet unknown, I walk anew the silver bridge of hope,
the whiplash of reason emblazons my back.

So tell: what other defense have we against the glowering dark?

Shabnam Nadiya is a short story writer, translator and poet.